

Zinder

January 2, 1956

Dr. Riley D. Housewright
Chief, MB Division
Camp Detrick, Frederick, Md.

Dear Housewright:

I have been thinking earnestly about your letter of December 28th last. The importance of your mission warrants no compromise in the qualifications of your appointee, but I am rather discouraged about the availability of any one who would be even as nearly well qualified for the post as Werner was, or as Atwood would have been. There are not very many bacterial geneticists in the country, that is people who would be particularly well qualified to advise your applied programs. The unfortunate divorce of Genetics from Medicine in this country (something that I hope will be rectified somewhat in coming years) makes it particularly difficult to find anyone who can combine an appreciation for pathogens with interest and training in genetics. My discouraging response is a considered opinion, but if someone comes to your mind whom I may have overlooked, I will be happy of the chance to revise it. I would mention the following exceptions, without knowing their likely availability.

1. M. R. Zelle is of course well known to you. Frankly his own research productivity in recent years has not measured up to his earlier promise, nor (to my mind) to his intrinsic abilities. I would judge him to be especially well qualified to act as genetic adviser in the context of the problems likely to come up in your organization, and he has the other qualifications, it goes without saying, to be a responsible research group leader. It may be that Max might even find a new stimulus in your environment and the opportunity of attracting and keeping two or three associates. I would be surprised if you had not already considered him, and he might well be reluctant to leave a secure university position. But he would fill the bill so well that you might want to consider making a special effort to persuade him.

2. The only other person who comes to mind/ is my former student, Norton Zinder. Zinder has an obvious promise for his future research, which is already based on substantial accomplishment. Since leaving here, he has continued to develop, and has certainly demonstrated his independent capabilities. He also has a strong background in medical bacteriology, both as his graduate major, and his subsequent experience in collaboration with Schnedder at Rockefeller. Intellectually, he would qualify as adviser about as well as Max, his strength being distributed a little differently; as an independent researcher, he is already more eminent. However, he is one of these fellows who grows up over a long period of time, and I can't quite visualize him as the effective leader of a research team, though he would collaborate very effectively

with his compeers. I am not sure whether he would be available, except that his position at Rockefeller is somewhat fluid, and they might commit a blunder that you give you access to him. He would undoubtedly prefer a university post to his present, or your possible position (but I think you must already be resigned to the likelihood that younger appointees are going to be restless). If you can get Zinder in the right context, he would be tremendously helpful to you. If you are prepared to go after him, I would suggest the following: 1) offer him, if you can, what seems to all of us an exorbitant salary; 2) offer him absolute certainty in the direction of his own research, on the condition that he reserve a moderate part of his time to advising the other programs; 3) play down the immediate necessity and prospects of "building up a team", though he should, of course, have adequate assistance for his own work. Unless you are really willing and able to go all out on 1) and 2), I doubt you will be able to attract anyone of the merits that your program deserves.

I may have misunderstood the possible mission of the "research group" that the applicant would have to be able to attract and select: would they be committed to his own fundamental aims, or to the applied problems of the Division under his supervision?

If my discouragement is justified, there are two possible alternatives: a) to hire one of a number of second-string possibilities, a decision which will of course influence the color of his whole group, b) recast the job. Do you need to have a Genetics Group? To fill that job effectively, you should have someone who is not only an adequately trained student, but who also has the maturity and experience to direct a number of others. Such paragons are already in great demand for university posts (I have the feeling there are more vacancies for chairmanships than for assistant-professorships these days!) and with the prevalent snobbery of our class, it may be difficult to attract them. Alternatively, as b), you might find a younger man who is not yet ready for leadership, but can qualify on other grounds and might be attracted on the terms 1) and 2) above. As I implied, Dr. Zinder falls between these two categories. If alternative b) seems reasonable, let me know if you would care to receive some suggestions, though one person, P.D. Skaar (now with Demerec) comes to my mind at once, and one of my present postdoctoral fellows, E.G. Bradley would be another strong contender.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics